

OUR COUNTRY MUSIC

HENRY AND SIDNEY ROBERTSON COWELL

WE in the United States today know less about our own country music than do any other people in the world. For this there are many reasons. The commercialized popular tunes of the city are widely plugged on the air. As a result, many country musicians have abandoned their own art in an attempt to imitate popular radio stars. In the last century, country children were taught to be ashamed of their own music and to consider only "opera" and "classical" music respectable; now their hero-worship is for the singer of the most plugged songs. More confusing still, the radio and movie studios have developed a gaudy artificial version of what passes for folk song, under the classification of "hill-billy." Country singers often arbitrarily change their own native way of doing things in favor of this Broadway cowboy style. Such hybridization is inevitable. Unfortunately it tends to reduce America's oral tradition in music to a dead level of uniformity, although the country is rich in the diversity and subtlety of its regional styles.

The best way to experience this music in its wealth and variety is to explore the country haunts of mountains and plains, immerse oneself in the tradition and learn to sing the songs. City people, bred to the separation of musician and audience, often fail to understand that folk music is not designed for such "performances." The music the country musician sings and plays is equally well known to all his listeners; indeed they participate actively in it with persistent toe-tapping, rocking to and fro, and hand-clapping; they warn the heroine, they approve the hero and admonish the villain. The performer is merely the voice of his community, the spokesman for his group's tradition or for its current emotion — this primarily because he has a better memory, a stronger voice, or a way with a rhyme. He may not even have a fine voice; all that is expected is that he can make it useful. If he knows you well enough to brag just a little, he may claim unusual endurance, or a superlative memory, or he will perhaps describe the great distances at which his voice was audible

when he was young. But there is no quicker way to reduce a folk singer to uncomfortable silence than by praising the quality of his voice or the skill of his performance. His friends and neighbors, listening in a big kitchen or a country store, are interested in the song, the story and its tune, and not in the performance. Personality, as a sophisticated performing artist understands it, counts for little in the rural tradition.

This detachment tends to sustain the Anglo-Saxon convention of understatement in poetry and performance. It has developed a subtlety of style which is not always immediately perceptible to city people accustomed to great dynamic range, to the effect of shock by contrast. Transplant your true folk singer to a concert hall or a night club and he quickly learns to dramatize and over-emphasize in order to project his songs to an audience unfamiliar with the tradition; and soon the tricks of Broadway showmanship change his style beyond recognition. And conversely, the trained singer who attends folk festivals and studies folk songs faithfully is no better able to reproduce the essence of this traditional music because he is concentrating, if not on his audience, at least on himself and the beauty of the sounds he is able to produce. To folk singers this is over-weening egotism and unfair to the songs.

III

Lacking the opportunity to hear directly a traditional performance of country music in the environment which gives it meaning, city people may take the next best course — a study of the records. The Library of Congress has now made available seven albums of American folk music from the Archive of American Folk Song. Before the radio achieved the over-all coverage it has today, Brunswick, Paramount, Victor and other companies made thousands of authentic recordings of country singers and dance bands in rural America, for distribution at dime store counters and crossroads hardware stores. Gems amongs these were Brunswick's *Pretty Polly* and *Darlin Corey*, and Paramount's unaccompanied blues by blind Negro singers. Today these, along with the reprints selected from similar commercial recordings by John Lomax and distributed two years ago under the title *Smoky Mountain Ballads*, are out of print. Moreover they were incompletely catalogued by the issuing companies and rarely reached the cities.

But the Archive has saved for us the national heritage of our folk song, which might have been lost forever by the ephemeral nature of such commercial record editions. The Archive was established by Robert

Winslow Gordon, with his own collections as nucleus, and later greatly enlarged under the aegis of the Lomaxes, father and son, Housed in the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., it is now under the direction of the noted folklorist Benjamin Botkin. This is the most comprehensive collection of American folk music in existence anywhere. For many reasons, it has not hitherto been within the reach of the large number of people anxious to hear it. Even in Washington there have been no facilities for its use by students. But today that situation is handsomely remedied.

The first of the seven albums now available is the one issued by the Friends of Music in 1941 which contains one record of southern mountain ballads and one record of Negro songs. The second is the album of *Iroquois Indian Music*, recorded in 1941 at Alleghany Reservation, New York, and at Six Nations Reserve, Canada. This contains Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and Oneida chants; an interesting accompanying booklet gives the necessary information with transcriptions and translations of many texts, all by Dr. William N. Fenton. Since there is no other available recording of this music, the album is invaluable for both education and research although the better-known southwestern Indian music is not represented.

In addition there are the five albums of folk music selected and edited by Alan Lomax. The first of these – *Anglo-American Ballads* – was planned to meet the requirements of the American Association of Teachers of English, who wanted British ballads with completely intelligible words. This, unfortunately from a musical point of view, eliminated some of the most interesting singing in our country. The ballads included are however very fine. In Album II, *Anglo-American Shanties, Lyric Songs, Dance Tunes, Spirituals*, Aunt Molly Jackson (from Kentucky), illustrates many of the delightful graces of style developed in the tradition of unaccompanied singing in the United States: the little grace notes leading up from the end of long tones in certain parts of the phrase, the unwavering tone, the curved melodic line, the glottal stops and breaks in the voice. All these nuances, here recorded, are lost when the tunes are written down. Only scant representation is given to the whole northern half of the United States in two songs from Wisconsin; thus it is impossible for the casual listener to catch the considerable difference in style between the rich tradition which moves west from Maine to Idaho and Oregon, and the southern mountain music. The two songs from California, the banjo music from Ohio and the fiddling are all definitely southern in character. Notably

absent are the come-all-ye's, the sea-ballads of the northern coast, and the dance music of the north. Such omissions, as also that of the superb singing from the Ozarks (already recorded for the Archive by Vance Randolph) will doubtless be remedied later. The white spirituals and the music of German Pennsylvania also should be included in this group.

The *Afro-American Spirituals, Work-Songs, Ballads*, Album III, on the other hand, cover an extraordinary range of styles. Some of the Negro music is much more African than the blues, spirituals and jazz rhythms with which we are more familiar. *Choose your seat and set down* was recorded at a colored church service. The scale and the expanding rhythm, made by umphing the beats with the voices, could both have come from western Africa. *Lead me to the Rock* might have been music of the Yoruba tribe, with its two-part counterpoint, open intervals and vocal rhythm. *Run, ol' Jeremiah*, from a Louisiana ceremonial, sounds like voodoo music, with signal-drumming and heterophonic singing. The main singer actually uses only one tone in the "melody," but the end of each line is inflected in a vocal slide up or down to punctuate the meaning. In *Long John* there are reiterated phrases of a work song, with the axe-falls emphasized in the rhythm.

Some songs from the Bahamas, in Album IV, *Afro-American Blues and Game Songs, Bahaman Music*, are in a hybrid style with three part chords, two-part counterpoint and a mixture of thirds and open fifths, a little like the music of Madagascar. *Round the Bay of Mexico*, on the other hand, is nearer to Calypso, the style that has been so thoroughly exploited in this country. Some of the Texan songs in Spanish sound more like Spain than Mexico: they are religious, with traces of Gregorian chant as taught by Spanish missionaries to America. Spanish folk influence is also felt through the percussive use of the guitar in the accompaniments of songs by two different white musicians in Texas, one of them a cowboy. Some of the Negro children use pentatonic scales in which the sixth and seventh degrees alternate, resulting in pentatonic modulation. Some groups talk together rhythmically, like Maori natives.

Music of our minority groups is partially represented in Album V, *French Ballads and Dance Tunes; Spanish Religious Songs and Game Songs* by Creole songs in French, from Louisiana, and songs in Spanish from Texas and New Mexico. These particular cultural groups have long since been sanctified in the United States by the history books. It is a little surprising to find the predominantly Scandinavian culture of the Great

Lakes region ignored, especially since this is the area of greatest literacy in the United States. It is also to be hoped that future albums will support our vaunted appreciation of the cultural contributions of *all* minority groups by presenting a cross-section of music which has been sung and played in America for generations by Orientals, Slavs, Near Easterners and countless other groups.

In making selections available from so large a collection, omissions are of course inevitable at this point. It should be said again that the music is a perfect delight to hear. Alan Lomax' historical and sociological notes on the songs and singers are extremely well done and distinguished by their honesty; no attempt is made to gloss over current hybridization in order to support the illusions of the purists, for example. The result is the most realistic and truly contemporary information about American folk music to be found at present anywhere. Technically the records are as noiseless as the average standard records being issued today; they are all suited for radio use (apart from consideration of textual propriety for certain songs); and they are available on order from the Recording Laboratory, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.